

SCOPE: A VILLAGE COLLEGE

Vol. 8, No. 6 — September, 1966

Dr. Manning M. Pattillo, *THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE TODAY*

THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE TODAY

The commencement address delivered by Manning M. Pattillo, Jr., at Avila College, Kansas City, Missouri, May 28, 1966. Dr. Pattillo is Associate Director of the Danforth Foundation.



Sister Olive Louise, C.S.J., President of Avila College and Dr. Manning M. Pattillo.

This is a time of soul-searching in collegiate education. While it would be extravagant to say that the liberal arts college is on the threshold of a renaissance, it can be asserted with confidence that a new spirit of ferment and a new self-consciousness have been born. Historically, the liberal arts college has been the basic unit in American higher education. Sometimes it has been a division of a university—usually called a college of arts and sciences; more often it has been a separate institution, described as a liberal arts college or simply a college. Most of the colonial colleges were transplantations of English colleges. Harvard, for example, was patterned on Emmanuel College, Cambridge. In the second half of the 19th century, a number of these colleges became universities by adding graduate and professional schools. Only a few institutions, such as Clark, Johns Hopkins, and Chicago, were universities from their beginning. The spectacular development of the graduate and professional functions of universities has tended to overshadow the liberal arts college, but the college has remained as the core of our system of higher education.

Avila is, of course, a liberal arts college. It is therefore appropriate that on an occasion such as this we consider the position of the liberal arts college in American education and some of the problems that are facing colleges of this type. In the short time we have this evening I should like to direct your attention to five changes that are especially significant, beginning with those that are most obvious.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION IS NOW A MATTER OF GREATER PUBLIC INTEREST THAN EVER BEFORE. Higher education has moved to the center of the

stage as one of the two or three most important social institutions of our time. This is primarily the result of the sheer importance of knowledge and research and trained manpower in a scientific and technological society, whether for waging war or building buildings or preserving health. Also, higher education has been expected to take on some of the functions of the church and home. It now shares in the setting of standards, the defining of goals, and the shaping of behavior. It does these things not only through its direct influence on students but also through its influence on other institutions such as the church and government. Thus, it plays a major role in determining the values and the aspirations of the society.

This is an age in which higher education is expected to perform miracles. The public has great confidence in colleges and universities and what they can accomplish, both for the individual and for the world at large. Personally, I am concerned that too much will be expected of educational institutions. If called upon to perform too many functions, they may not do well what they are uniquely fitted to do.

For the liberal arts college there are both benefits and hazards in the new position of higher education. The college enjoys a strengthened appeal for money and students. It is more prosperous than it used to be. It can attract the most able people to its board of trustees and to its cause. It is also widely misunderstood. Liberal education, soundly conceived, does not match the miraculous public image of higher education. Its outcomes are subtle changes of understanding and taste and spirit that may seem unspectacular in this age of spectacular atomic and space developments. You who are about to become alumnae of Avila can perform a valuable service for liberal education by taking advantage of every opportunity to explain the purposes of a liberal arts college to all who will listen.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION IS GOING THROUGH A PERIOD OF TREMENDOUS GROWTH AND POPULARIZATION SIMILAR TO THAT EXPERIENCED BY

SECONDARY EDUCATION EARLIER IN THE CENTURY. Both the number of students and the percentage of young people of college age attending college are increasing rapidly. College enrollment has doubled in the last decade and will probably double again in the next. The task of somehow accommodating this influx of students is enormous.

The effects of this phenomenon on undergraduate education are far-reaching; many of them are indirect. For most private colleges one of the effects is greater selectivity of students. An institution confronted with more applicants than it can accept does not have to admit the student who is clearly unsuited for college. This means that the level of achievement in many colleges is being raised. The amount and quality of work required of students are increasing.

The growth in student population is leading to the establishment of new institutions on a wide scale. The new colleges are primarily tax-supported. Local junior colleges are being set up in many communities, and new state colleges and universities are being organized. Thus, the private sector in higher education, though growing, is becoming a smaller fraction of the total educational enterprise. Most of the enlargement is taking place in public institutions, both old and new. It is hard to say what the long-range implications of this trend will be, but it does upset the historic balance between public and independent education. Both tax-supported and privately-supported institutions make important contributions to the public welfare, and it is essential that our dual system of higher education be maintained and strengthened.

The growth of colleges and universities has created heavy demands for scholarly personnel, so that all institutions, including liberal arts colleges, are faced with competition for qualified faculty members. There are acute shortages of well-trained teachers in some fields. Faculty salaries are rising sharply. From an economic point of view, college teaching is becoming a more attractive profession.

With the rapid movement of both faculty and students from one institution to another, with the very large student bodies in some universities, and with the development of state-wide *systems* of higher education, we are observing a subtle change in the character of institutions. They are tending to lose their individuality. This is a difficult change to document, but I have the impression, as I visit colleges and universities of different types, that large segments of American higher education are being "homogenized," so to speak. There is a trend toward sameness. This, I think, is unfortunate.

The diversity in American education is one of its most cherished assets. We must take steps to preserve it. Also, the preoccupation of administrative officers, governing boards, and often faculties with the logistical problems involved in providing physical facilities, staff, and money for a greatly enlarged enterprise may often divert attention from curricular and instructional interests. The sheer managerial job of supplying education to so many students is likely to obscure questions as to the *kind* of education to be offered. This happened in secondary education during the period of tremendous growth of public high schools. The examination of many educational questions was deferred until the pressing task of simply providing for pupils was in hand. There is a real danger that this may happen in higher education, too. The small college, with its emphasis on individuality, is one of the bulwarks against the hazards of bigness in education.

3. COLLEGES ARE NOW OPERATING AT AN ACCELERATED TEMPO. Administrators, faculty members, students—all are trying to do too much. Competition is becoming more intense all along the line. Life seems so hurried on campuses today. The pace is becoming more like that of business and industry. Every force impinging upon colleges and universities seems to be working in this direction. The administration of colleges and universities is far more complicated than it once was. The pressures on students are greater. Psychiatric difficulties are probably more numerous. Scholars

struggle to keep up with the enormous expansion of knowledge.

What does this mean for the liberal arts college? It has dispelled the easy-going, country-club atmosphere characteristic of campus life at an earlier time. Collegiate education is now a serious business, and we can be thankful for that. But we must see to it that we protect a valuable ingredient in the long tradition of liberal education—the reflective, the judicious, the philosophizing aspect of liberal learning at its best. To some extent, American activism has invaded the thoughtful climate of liberal education. This is not bad if we can, at the same time, emphasize the thinking and deliberating activities of students.

The old-fashioned college in the British residential tradition had its weaknesses. For some students it offered three or four years of genteel irresponsibility. At its worst it was pedestrian, uninspiring, and remote from real life. Yet it had its virtues as well, and there is every reason to preserve its virtues in our own colleges, while rejecting its vices. One of its virtues was that, for the earnest student, it offered an opportunity for unhurried reflection on fundamental matters under the guidance of broadly educated men.

The historians Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger, writing of the pre-Civil War college, say:

Men of considerable intellectual distinction came in reasonable numbers from its halls. It tried seriously to cultivate both the minds and the characters of its students. Its classical curriculum exposed them to great writers, great ideas, and fine expression. It encouraged articulate writing and thinking, and indicated that these abilities were to be put to work in civic as well as private affairs. It introduced its students to the problems of philosophy and theology.¹

4. WE ARE WITNESSING, IN HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY, AN UNPRECEDENTED INSISTENCE ON FREEDOM. In some respects this is good; colleges should be places where inquiry flourishes, where students and faculty reason about matters which other people take for granted. In other respects the current trend is unfortunate; too often freedom is interpreted as lack of restraint, as license to do as one

pleases regardless of the rights and sensibilities of others.

At a time of social and religious ferment it is especially important that church colleges develop proper guidelines for the exercise of freedom. We have already observed the plight of two American universities torn asunder by their failure to deal wisely with this problem. It is imperative that institutions define the proper limits of public debate and social behavior. In my judgment this is the most urgent problem facing Catholic colleges today. I predict that in the years ahead Catholic institutions will face this problem acutely in two forms: (1) the questioning of church authority and teaching on the part of some faculty members and (2) student protests against institutional authority and discipline. It is important that each college formulate principles which it can apply when specific cases arise. This should be done ahead of time; it is too late when emergencies confront us. The Second Vatican Council has provided a model for the orderly discussion of fundamental questions. There is much that colleges can learn from the example and the actions of this memorable gathering.

We need to view student conduct in a broader context. With the praiseworthy emphasis these days on legal rights, on social equality, and on stripping away hypocrisy—all good things in themselves—we may neglect other values—decorum, propriety, taste, good manners, prudence. (Indeed, these words have come to have an unpleasant connotation in many quarters.) When students in a Pennsylvania college disrupt chapel with political demonstrations; when a self-appointed committee of students in a Middle Western college demand that the President allow them to review and evaluate the salaries of faculty members; when a movement in defense of obscene language can be launched and be taken seriously in a great university, then something has gone wrong. What is lacking is a sense of appropriateness. We need to restore balance and perspective and respect for the sensibilities of others. This is an important function of liberal education.

Our colleges are not alone in this. It is a characteristic of contemporary culture. We see it in advertising, in politics, in public entertainment, and in the literary world. But the liberal arts college should be one of the primary agencies for defining sound standards of taste and manners—for preserving what Sir Ernest Barker has called the traditions of civility.

5. MANY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE EMPHASIZING SPECIALIZED COMPETENCE AT THE EXPENSE OF PREPARATION FOR GENERAL LEADERSHIP. No one wishes to disparage the achievements of technical scholarship nor the value of training students for essential occupations such as the priesthood, teaching, engineering, the health professions, and a host of others. The public welfare requires that we have well-trained practitioners in a wide variety of professional fields.

The danger, however, is that specialized and professional interests will crowd out the broader aims of liberal education. Cardinal Newman, a great interpreter of liberal education, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, stressed what he called "philosophical knowledge," by which he meant an understanding of principles and relationships. One of the classic statements on the subject is that of John Stuart Mill in his "Inaugural Address" at the University of St. Andrews in 1867. He said:

Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians. What professional men should carry away with them from a University is not professional knowledge, but that which should direct the use of professional knowledge, and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit. Men may be competent lawyers without general education, but it depends on general education to make them philosophic lawyers.

While it is useful to know what profound thinkers have meant by liberal education in times past, this is not the main point I want to make. We are not primarily interested in maintaining the purity of a traditional idea of collegiate education. A more compelling argument for liberal education is simply that

the world today badly needs people educated for broad leadership—people with vision and perspective and wisdom. I mean men and women like John and Jacqueline Kennedy. Whatever one's political convictions, he can recognize that the Kennedys contributed something to our national life that narrowly educated people cannot give. In a very real sense the Kennedys exemplified the importance of liberal education in public leadership.

This point has recently been made by John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and President (on leave) of the Carnegie Corporation, an educational foundation. In the last annual report of the Corporation Dr. Gardner put it this way:

Most of our intellectually gifted young people go from college directly into graduate school or into one of the older and more prestigious professional schools. There they are introduced to—or, more correctly, powerfully indoctrinated in—a set of attitudes appropriate to scholars, scientists, and professional men. This is all to the good. The students learn to identify themselves strongly with their calling and its ideals. They acquire a conception of what a good scholar, scientist, or professional man is like.

As things now stand, however, that conception leaves little room for leadership in the normal sense; the only kind of leadership encouraged is that which follows from the performing of purely professional tasks in a superior manner. Entry into what most of us would regard as the leadership roles in the society at large is discouraged.

.....
As a result the academic world appears to be approaching a point at which every one will want to educate the technical expert who advises the leader, or the intellectual who stands off and criticizes the leader, but no one will want to educate the leader himself.²

At its best the liberal arts college is pre-eminently the school for leadership. How does it prepare for leadership? By doing a few important tasks well. What are those tasks? To see that its students know how to read, write, and speak well. To give them some knowledge of history—especially the history of ideas. To help them understand the methodology of science and the significance of scientific discovery for society. To immerse them in a few of the enduring works of literature. To develop in them a layman's appreciation of great art and

great music. To instill in them a sense of the appropriate in social and personal relationships—that is to say, an understanding of what is in good taste. To encourage them to grapple with the perennial problems of mankind and to think about these questions with some precision. To help them arrive at a reasoned personal philosophy—at least a few principles to guide their lives.

Isn't this what we expect of the liberal arts college? And isn't this what we hope today's graduates have learned in their four years at Avila?

¹Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p.227.
²John W. Gardner, "The Anti-leadership Vaccine," *Annual Report for the Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 1965* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1965), pp. 9-11.

Dates To Remember

SEPTEMBER — Avila's exhibition of antique toys from the collection of Mr. Jerry Smith.

SEPTEMBER 25 — Holy Mass to invoke God's blessings on the school year. O'Rielly Hall at 7 p.m.
Reception for Mr. Jerry Smith at 8 p.m. in the alumnae lounge in Marian Center.

OCTOBER 9 — Avila's Fiftieth Anniversary Homecoming. Holy Mass at 11 a.m. in O'Rielly Hall followed by brunch in Marian Center.

Can You Top This?

On August 31, Geraldine Sulzer '55 wrote a check for \$100.00 for the Alumnae Fund of Avila College. The Business Men's Assurance where Geraldine is employed matched this gift. Result—a gift of \$200.00 for the college. At that very time the alumnae officers were planning to launch a drive for the continuing support fund; so without knowing it, Geraldine and her company launched the drive. The alumnae officers had planned to ask each alumna to give a dollar for every year Avila has been in existence since the college is fifty years old this year and a jubilee year is a bit special. Geraldine topped this. Together with BMA she topped it four times. Now Avila is asking this question: "How much nicer can anyone get?"

SCOPE

Vol. 6, No. 6 — September, 1966

Published bi-monthly in January, March,
May, July, September and November by

AVILA COLLEGE

11901 Wornall Road
Kansas City, Missouri 64145

RETURN REQUESTED

Second-Class Postage
Paid at

Kansas City, Missouri